

CHALLENGES FOR THE POLITICAL COMPETENCE OF CITIZENS IN THE CONTEXT OF UKRAINE'S EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

Anastasiia Stoliarova

Postgraduate Student at the Department of Political Theories,
Faculty of Psychology, Political Science and Sociology,
National University "Odesa Law Academy", Ukraine
e-mail: politics@onua.edu.ua, orcid.org/0000-0001-8962-5776

Summary

The article aims at identifying the latest challenges for the political competence of Ukrainian citizens in the context of European integration. Russia's large-scale aggression is certainly becoming a major challenge for citizens, those who are forced to save their lives under daily cruise missile attacks launched from a terrorist country. At the same time, the war leveled differences between the regions on the issue of European and Euro-Atlantic integration, consolidated Ukrainian society around democratic values and democratic choice. Political competence of citizens is defined as a complex socio-political phenomenon that allows assessing the rationality and effectiveness of government actions and exercises the right to change government. Applying the institutionalism of rational choice, it has been determined that it is the ability of citizens to make democratic choices in difficult conditions that is a convincing evidence of a high level of political competence. Based on the method of historical institutionalism, the completion of the post-Soviet transformations stage is noted.

Ukrainians have made their choice in favor of democracy. At the same time, new challenges arise for the citizens' political competence. They are institutional in nature and are associated with the activities of such institutions as elections (electoral campaigns at the national and local levels), mass media, the institute of political education, civil society, and so on. It is proved that the political competence of citizens is manifested in the electoral process, but is not limited to just participation in voting. It consists in the implementation of a control function – a critical and rational assessment of the actions of public authorities and the opposition. This is the reason for the role of mass media and civil society. The challenges to the activities of the mass media institute are the mediatization of politics (media shows, media scandals) and, at the same time, attempts by the public authorities to restrict freedom of speech. Such restrictions, which are absolutely justified under martial law, potentially pose a threat minding a return to the authoritarian model in the relations "Power – Mass media – Society".

Special attention is paid to the role of the institute of public intellectuals in the process of forming the political competence of citizens.

Key words: democracy, political competence, political institutions, democratization, mass media, civil society, political education, public intellectuals, European integration.

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1. Introduction

Democracy is impossible without competent citizens able to make a choice. New challenges for political competence are caused by the formation of the information age, they are associated with the mediatization of politics, media scandals and attempts by the authorities in

some countries to restrict freedom of speech. Ukraine has made its own democratic choice – European and Euro-Atlantic integration.

Sound public policy in a democracy is based on the opinion of citizens, so political competence becomes the key to good governance.

Political competence in democratic countries is fully manifested in the ability of citizens to make rational electoral choice (change governments during elections), to critically assess the activities of public authorities. In the realities of war, the security dimension of the political competence of citizens is of particular importance. After all, citizens of Ukraine are forced, instead of everyday affairs and evaluating the activities of politicians, to acquire skills to survive under shelling, without electricity, or even without housing, environmental genocide caused by the destruction of the Kakhovskiy reservoir and the threat of nuclear escalation by some representatives of the authorities of the aggressor country, the terrorist country. This is a completely new dimension of political competence for the twenty-first century – a rational assessment of the public authorities actions in the context of the largest war in Europe. The need to overcome new challenges **actualizes** the need to study the political competence of citizens in the context of European integration, as well as the Euro-Atlantic one. After all, we must not forget that large-scale armed aggression is aimed precisely at preventing the European and Euro-Atlantic integration of Ukraine, complicating the processes of democratization, etc.

The aim of the study is to identify challenges for the political competence of Ukrainian citizens in the context of European integration. This goal led to the **following research tasks**:

- determining the institutional nature of challenges to the political competence of citizens using the ‘new institutionalism’ methodology;
- substantiating the role of mass media institutions and elections in shaping the political competence of citizens and identifying the mediatization of politics and media scandals as new challenges for it;
- identifying possible ways to overcome new challenges for the political competence of citizens and identifying institutions that play an important role in this process.

Research methodology. It is determined by the specific goal and objectives of the study. Considering that challenges to the political competence of citizens are institutional in nature, the methodology of new institutionalism was applied. The idea of historical institutionalism to determine the dependence on the post-Soviet experience ("*the path passed*") in the process of forming the political competence of citizens. Understanding the importance of social factors (the level in consolidation of society, values, empathy and altruism) which the sociological institutionalism emphasizes. The focus of the process of forming the political competence of citizens is on the rationalization of their behavior, along with the need to understand the importance of public good and the focus of democratic choice on its implementation (institutionalism of rational choice). To solve the research tasks and achieve a certain goal, the appropriate logic of presenting the material was applied – from identifying new challenges for political competence to justifying possible ways to rationalize the democratic choice of citizens in the context of European integration.

2. Political competence of citizens: electoral choice and assessment of governance

The political competence of citizens under democracy is fully manifested during the electoral process. A minimum level of political competence is necessary for citizens of democratic countries to determine, at the most general level, the criteria for "good governance" and evaluate the current actions of public authorities. Electoral choice involves media literacy,

critical thinking, and the ability to identify real alternatives to choice and choose one of them based on rationality. At the same time, the electoral choice necessarily contains elements of a media show. In the world of internet communications, political election shows allow mobilizing own target group, consolidate the electorate around the candidate. They possess an important emotional component. But, unfortunately, in Ukraine, electoral media shows have completely replaced political debates between candidates, turning the exchange of rational arguments into the "spare wheel" of the electoral process.

In previous works, it was already necessary to note that "fundamental condition for the European choice of Ukraine is the political competence of a citizen... in the information society, the political competence of citizens becomes part of their daily life."...» (Stoliarova, 2022). It should be noted, that in the process of forming the political competence of Ukrainian citizens, the following factors were of particular influence. "First, the Soviet experience of the authorities' paternalistic attitude towards citizens and the difficult path for Ukrainian society to overcome it. Secondly, there is insufficient attention of both the authorities and citizens to political education, including adult education. In modern conditions, increasing the level of political competence of citizens should occur throughout life – from the school desk to adult education in the form of trainings on the theory and practice of political science, lectures by well-known political scientists, lawyers, sociologists and economists, and round tables. Third, the mediatization of politics directly affects the level of political competence of citizens, since the reduction of complex political and socio-economic problems to shows in the mass media and the development of manipulative information and communication technologies complicates the rational choice of citizens. Citizens actually have to make decisions in the context of information chaos, when the ability to select relevant information and identify fake news comes to the fore, separating them from the reliable information" (Stoliarova, 2022).

Ukrainian citizens have chosen democracy and are defending their democratic choice both on the Maidan during the 'Orange Revolution' (2004) and the Revolution of Dignity (2013–2014), and with weapons in their hands facing a large-scale Russian invasion. It can be argued that the stage of post-Soviet transformation has been completed, and the dependence of the future Ukrainian society on the Soviet authoritarian experience has radically decreased. And this is in contrast to other countries that remain supporters of an authoritarian type of governance, which requires citizens not competence, but submission.

It comes as no surprise that Leonid Kuchma, the second president of Ukraine, known for his book "Ukraine is not Russia", clarified his statement after the beginning of the Russian aggression: "Ukraine is not Russia. And it will never become Russia. Do not count on it! We are already winning. And there's nothing to stop it" (Perun, 2022).

In the context of the new democratic cooperation, the significance of the political competence of the government and the opposition, whose activities the existence of an independent Ukrainian state depends on, increases. In other words, the political competence of authorities and citizens in war conditions should respond to the challenges of statehood and independence, and not just to the question of choosing what Ukraine should be like. First, we are talking about the implementation of the foreign policy choice made in favor of European and Euro-Atlantic integration. Obviously, the East – West alternative has been overcome. It is to be noted: "The political debate in the mass media about the foreign policy choice today concerns not only the existential dilemma of the Ukrainian "East – West" establishment rooted in the history. Ukraine's foreign policy choice defines European and Euro-Atlantic integration at the level of consensus of the ruling class, it is enshrined in the legal field. Strategic choice is made... EU and NATO integration is hampered by the need for simultaneous disintegration with the Soviet totalitarianism and the postimperial legacy» (Yakovlev, Amirov & Stoliarova, 2021).

As for domestic policy alternatives, the definition and choice of which requires a high level of political competence, it should be agreed that such alternatives, at a minimum, include "authoritarianism v. democracy", "parliamentary v. presidential republic" (choosing the form of governance), "proportional v. majority model" (choosing the electoral system) (*Yakovlev, 2016*).

In general, the political choice of citizens does not require a high level of political education or any special knowledge. This view is confirmed by A. Lupia and M. McCubbins. They define it as follows: "Decades of survey research document a long list of political questions that the common citizen cannot answer. Less well documented is what this lack of information implies about citizen competence. A common conclusion is that citizens who cannot answer political questions (i.e., those who score low on typical survey-based measures of political sophistication or knowledge) are not competent participants in the political process. We reject this conclusion. We argue that for many of the most common political tasks – such as voting in a presidential election or for or against a piece of legislation – competence requires very little information. Moreover, we contend that what little information competent performance requires in these contexts can be learned from others (e.g., political parties, elite endorsements, friends, and family)" (*Lupia & McCubbins, 2000*).

In other words, a democratic environment and the ability to choose a source of political information play an important role in the formation of political competence. These include both the mass media and friends or family. In the context of the development of internet communications, there are new challenges for the political competence of citizens. These challenges require new institutions that will contribute to the formation of political competence of citizens.

3. New challenges for the citizens' political competence

In the context of European integration, which provides for democratic reflexivity, inclusivity and proximity, that is, expanding the space of citizens' participation in the development and implementation of political choices, the institutional dimension of politics in Ukraine is being transformed. The activation of civil society institutions, the formation of a party system and the development of state – independent mass media are integral components of democratization. At the same time, there are new challenges that need answers.

P. Rosanvallon writes about the new democratic legitimacy, which should take into account the new democratic interaction formed under the influence of the development of internet communications. This is a global process. After all, "It was the Internet that turned the very concept of public opinion upside down. If earlier it existed only in an organized or presented form (in the form of polls, statements of mass media, parties or various speakers), now it has a direct and independent material consistency. There is nothing hidden in the World Wide Web (even though nothing can be arithmetic and measured here). This completely changed the conditions of response of the ruling circles to society...the political identity loses its structure. From now on, the variable break lines are redisplayed (reproduced) on an increasing number of topics. This leads to the weakening and relativization of the majority concept" (*Rosanvallon, 2009, 257*). Those changes associated with the formation of the internet communications space, which cause institutional challenges for the formation of political competence of citizens, can be compared with the period of the Industrial Revolution and democratization in Europe. It is worth agreeing that "the emergence of civic competence as a social phenomenon is directly related to the transition from traditional to mature civil society and the process of civic socialization.". Back in the XVII–XVIII centuries, the enlighteners Rousseau, Voltaire, Locke and others actively discussed T. Hobbes' book "On the Citizen". For civil society, they

believed, we need a developed, highly self-aware, independent citizen who defends both his/her individual and public interests" (Shevchuk, 2018).

Accordingly, modern democratic interaction requires the establishment of new institutions. Just as political parties once emerged as a result of the consolidation of universal suffrage, so modern challenges require adequate institutional responses. According to P. Rosanvallon, the new institution of democratic political interaction of the Internet era should be the "public commission": "Its role is to record needs and requests, clarify analyses, introduce debates, outline the conditions for possible solutions... The public commission should be perceived as a kind of *enzyme* (catalyst) for the public interaction" (Rosanvallon, 2009, 257). It is obvious that the implementation of such an idea requires increasing the level of political competence of citizens, media literacy in particular, as the ability to make rational choices in the context of mediatization of politics.

The role of the public intellectuals institution is growing in the new conditions of a democratic interaction. It should be noted the opinion of P. Rosanvallon, who believes that "... great moments of the breakthrough of democracy have always corresponded to paradigm amendments in the intellectual sphere. That is why activists, journalists and scientists are once again called upon to join forces" (Rosanvallon, 2009, p. 259). We agree that "Public intellectuals, as a component of the intellectual elite of Ukrainian society, refusing to identify with the "Soviet/ post-Soviet intelligentsia", offer their own rational visions of democratization and modernization of the Ukrainian society, at the same time, looking for their own place in the public discourse – from "image makers", "political strategists", "creative class" to the next version of "servants" of the "oligarchic-lumpen" alliance. In political communication, public intellectuals apply the technology of open letters, applications and appeals. Public intellectuals, when appealing to the public, perform an important function of rationalizing political communication" (Yakovlev, 2022). Given that the activities of public intellectuals are aimed at rationalizing public policy, the institute of public intellectuals can become a safeguard for mediatizing politics, turning politics into a media process and a media show.

Public intellectuals can potentially become part of the public commissions that P. Rosanvallon wrote about. After all, it is the political competence, which public intellectuals possess, that allows them to make rational choices, to determine the public interest and follow it in public policy.

4. Conclusions

To increase the level of political competence of citizens, special attention should be paid to political education. Political education plays a particularly important role in the post-Soviet stage, when the traditions of authoritarian governance are no longer perceived by the majority of citizens, but the standards, norms and rules of democratic political interaction are not yet established. But the main thing for political competence is the influence of civil society. It is civil society, which consists of individuals for whom the public good is a priority, but not private interests, that is the environment of democratic political competence. In the modern world, it is not enough to make rational choices. Competence primarily consists in the ability to determine the public interest by formulating an alternative to the political choice "*private interest v. public interest*" and actively defend that public interest. In a democracy, the foundation of political competence is laid in the process of socialization of individuals under the influence of civil society.

The process of Ukraine's European integration requires increasing the level of political competence of citizens regarding the selection and critical assessment of information distributed

on the Internet. After all, the communicative dimension of a European integration is one of the main ones. Attracting citizens to the European information environment is a prerequisite for successful European integration. Media literacy and the ability to choose a reliable source of political information come to the fore. And public intellectuals play an important role in this.

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